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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002550

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL RS

SUBJECT: DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION TEST DRIVES UNITY,
OPPOSITION TO WAR

Classified By: Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Alice G. Wel
ls. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Liberal opposition party SPS, former PM Kasyanov, and the unregistered Republican Party have attempted to increase cooperation through joint statements, public rallies, and opposition to the conduct of the war against Georgia. Although Yabloko did not sign the joint statement, some of its leaders have appeared publicly with other opposition parties at rallies to call for increased personal and press freedoms. Former PM Kasyanov and Yabloko leader Sergey Mitrokhin have both called Russia's conduct against Georgia "disproportionate," introducing a new point of division with the Kremlin and with the large percentage of Russians who support the war. Despite the rhetoric, the opposition remains far from united and will find little public traction in opposing a war that remains overwhelmingly popular among Russian voters. End Summary.

A New Attempt at Opposition Unity

¶12. (SBU) On August 19, three opposition parties issued a joint statement on uniting efforts to win votes in the October regional and municipal elections. The Union of Right Forces (SPS), along with unregistered Russian People's Democratic Union (RNDS) and the Republican Party, released the statement on the seventeenth anniversary of the 1991 coup attempt by Communist hard-liners. According to press reports, Yabloko did not sign the statement because its leadership did not believe the statement adequately addressed issues related to criminality and corruption in the 1990s.

¶13. (SBU) On August 21, Yabloko leader Sergey Mitrokhin held a press conference to explain Yabloko's role in the opposition yet outside the new alliance. Mitrokhin explained that "a new political course" and "a return to democracy are vital" amid "the unprecedented widespread degradation of Russia's social sphere." According to Mitrokhin, Yabloko offers "solutions and leadership" while the current Russian government offers only nationalism as a policy. Kasyanov's advisor, Oleg Bukleminov, told us that Mitrokhin continued to have to adhere to former party chief Grigoriy Yavlinsky's status quo dictates -- "Mitrokhin plays Medvedev to Yavlinsky's Putin."

¶14. (SBU) On August 22, on the occasion of Russian National Flag Day, several democratic opposition groups held a protest adjacent to the White House in Moscow. Approximately 500 attendees heard speeches from party leaders and intellectuals, who generally spoke in broad terms in favor of press and political freedoms and against corruption and poverty. Boris Nemtsov of SPS called for an end to government corruption. Vladimir Ryzhkov of the Republican Party decried the insufficient benefits that average Russians have received as a result of Russia's strong economic growth. Ryzhkov calculated that Prime Minister Putin "equals inflation plus corruption." Yabloko's Ilya Yashin lamented

that in nine years Russia had moved from Bolsheviks and Chekists to the Putin regime. For this reason, he noted, Russians should remember the 1991 coup attempt as the point when citizens stood for their freedom. Speakers repeatedly raised a photograph from 1991 of the crowd that gathered as the coup failed, using it as a rallying cry for Russians to restart their pursuit of democracy.

Opposition's Anti-War Sentiment Grows

¶5. (SBU) Some opposition leaders have been outspoken in their opposition to Russia's conduct of war against Georgia. Former PM Kasyanov made public statements condemning the "disproportionate" use of force against Georgia, while maintaining that Georgian President Saakashvili acted unwisely in provoking a Russian response. During the August 22 protest rally, human rights activist Gleb Yakunin spoke against Russia's military actions. "We have a tragedy" that will prove to be a "big mistake" when, he predicted, Georgia and Ukraine are admitted to NATO as a result of the conflict.

During his August 21 press conference, Mitrokhin discussed the "disproportionate" actions by Russia in South Ossetia. Lev Ponomarev, head of the All Russia Movement for Human Rights, organized an opposition anti-war rally that took place on August 25 in Moscow.

¶6. (C) Comment: It is unlikely this most recent attempt at cooperation will amount to more than rhetoric leading up to October's regional and municipal elections. Yabloko's insistence on first "clearing the air" from the 1990s does not bode well for opposition unity, and these liberal

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opposition remnants are swimming upstream by opposing a war with Georgia that is overwhelmingly popular among Russians.

End Comment.

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